

An Effective Digital Learning Resource Can Significantly Improve Motivation, Engagement, and Self-Confidence

—Dr. Leslie Ponciano[†]

“Since using ABCmouse.com, I’ve seen Alex blossom. He’s more confident; he’s more outgoing. He knows that he’s learning, and he’s proud of himself for it.”

—Jennifer M.
parent of 3-year-old

Motivation, excitement about learning, and self-confidence as a learner are qualities most parents would love to see more of in their children. Whether a child is at-risk and struggling to meet early learning milestones or on target with expectations, fostering a positive approach to learning can substantially improve school readiness and long-term academic outcomes.

As parents increasingly turn to educational websites and apps to help their children build academic skills at home, they may not appreciate that these tools vary widely in quality and effectiveness. High-quality and effective digital learning resources can make a significant impact not only on the development of key academic knowledge, skills, and abilities, but also on critical non-academic factors, including motivation, focus, engagement, and self-confidence. The experiences of two families illustrate these effects.

Researchers find that it is critical for educators and parents to acknowledge the role of social and emotional competencies in learning.¹ Heckman suggests that social-emotional skills, self-discipline, and other non-academic competencies contribute to academic skill formation as well as later success in life.²

Michael G. was born with a congenital heart defect and spent the first eight months of his life in and out of the hospital. By the time he turned two, his mother Nicole was worried that he was developmentally behind his peers.

“When your kid is not meeting milestones, they don’t tell you anything except, ‘He’ll get there. He’ll catch up.’ So, I was looking for something to help him catch up because eight months to me is a pretty big gap.”

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¹ Zins, Weissberg, Wang, & Walberg, 2004

² Heckman, 2006

Jennifer M. is the mother of three-year-old Alex. Though she and her husband were confident that Alex was typical for his age, they wanted to create an enriched home environment in which Alex would develop a lifelong love of learning.

“Alex is your typical three-year-old boy . . . but there was still something in me that thought, what else could I give my son? What else can I do to help him grow?”

Both Nicole and Jennifer were looking for digital learning resources to help their children, though for different reasons. After finding numerous other education websites and apps ineffective, they both turned to ABCmouse.com because of its comprehensive academic curriculum. In Nicole’s experience, “A lot of apps are just games; they don’t have educational value.” According to Jennifer, “What I’ve noticed with the other apps is that they’re more static; there’s just a couple of activities to do and it’s not that interesting to a three-year-old boy.”

Nicole and Jennifer discovered that the benefits of using ABCmouse.com transcended academics and contributed to major gains they hadn’t expected in their children’s motivation, focus, engagement, and self-confidence.

Strengthening Motivation to Learn

For a child struggling to meet developmental milestones, motivation plays a critical role in facilitating progress. With ABCmouse.com, Nicole could see Michael beginning to enjoy learning for its own sake, and she recognized the benefits of a resource that increased her son’s motivation to learn.

“It’s not a job. It’s not that he is working hard at learning and it’s a task that he has to do. He wants to do it. He wants to play. He wants to learn. ABCmouse.com flicks that switch so that they start learning and they want to keep learning.”

She also discovered that Michael was motivated by ABCmouse.com to challenge himself to learn more advanced skills.

“Even if he plays the same game, he’ll play it over and make it harder. He started off doing very basic puzzles, and he’s already up to difficulty-level seven. If something is a little bit too complicated for him, that’s when he’ll come and get me and have me help him play the game. Within a few rounds of playing the game, he’s got it down. He loves challenging himself!”

The appropriate stage of difficulty of a task for each individual child is a key factor in triggering motivation. If it is too easy, completion of the activity may have little value. If it is too difficult, the challenge can become overwhelming and the rate of success very low.³ Moreover, early research into computer use with young children found that digital technology facilitates independence and a sense of control over learning that increases motivation and self-esteem.⁴

Jennifer also noticed the positive impact ABCmouse.com had on her son’s motivation. “After starting ABCmouse.com, we saw a major change. He just blossomed. I just saw his enthusiasm for learning skyrocket!” Alex responded to ABCmouse.com’s built-in rewards system: “He loves building his hamster cage with his tickets. He loves his fish tank. He enjoys going on his learning path and making progress and earning rewards along the way.”

Jennifer saw Alex’s increased motivation to learn leading to gains in academic subjects: “We saw results immediately, within weeks, and I didn’t expect that. He started . . . recognizing letters and numbers, and then shortly thereafter, reading and writing. And that was mind-blowing to me.”

³ Eccles & Wigfield, 2002

⁴ Ainsa, 1989; Clements & Swaminathan, 1995; Lee & Houston, 1987

The Power of Engagement

As with motivation, focus and engagement with learning in early childhood are key to school readiness and academic achievement, and effective digital learning resources can make a significant difference in developing these cognitive processes.

Jennifer originally started Alex on ABCmouse.com to help him learn his letters and numbers. She was overjoyed when she also saw Alex growing in his social-emotional abilities and flourishing at school. He began participating more in school activities, and his teachers reported that he had started playing with a wider range of classmates and was becoming more comfortable in preschool.

Jennifer credits much of Alex's growth to how ABCmouse.com mimics a classroom setting, preparing him for the structured nature of school. Armed with these virtual experiences, Alex approached the real classroom with more focus and participated more in the social and academic environment.

"Being exposed to preschool and then also to ABCmouse.com has helped him to understand that at times he does need to sit down, focus, and learn the activity that's being presented. It's amazing that a young boy with tons of energy is able to sit and focus for 15, 20 minutes at a time and learn. And it's not something I'm forcing him to do; it's something he wants to do. And that's magical; somehow ABCmouse.com magically hones him in, and that's a great thing!"

Children who learn to regulate their emotions and actions are better able to avoid distractions, focus on appropriate tasks, and process the necessary information to gain new knowledge or skills and accomplish goals.⁵ Educational technology has been found to increase on-task behavior,⁶ the expression of positive emotions,⁷ active participation,⁸ and an excitement and engagement with learning⁹ as compared to more traditional pedagogical techniques.

Like Alex, after Michael began using ABCmouse.com at home, he became more engaged in learning at school. Nicole heard from his preschool teachers that he's "the only child at circle time who will jump up and down and enthusiastically answer every single question." Nicole attributed the academic and non-academic gains that Michael was showing both at home and in the school environment to his use of ABCmouse.com. "I watched him go from disengaged to deeply engaged and focused He's running around and being a crazy two-year-old, and then he'll sit down and focus on ABCmouse.com. It's unbelievable how attention-getting it is!"

Growing Self-Confidence

Self-confidence as a learner is another critical factor that contributes to school readiness and success. Jennifer had noticed that Alex could be shy and nervous in new environments. Her biggest surprise with ABCmouse.com was its impact on Alex's self-confidence, and how that changed his behavior at school:

"I feel like ABCmouse.com has been a major confidence booster. Since using ABCmouse.com, I've seen Alex blossom. He's more confident; he's more outgoing. He knows that he's learning, and he's proud of himself for it. He started to feel more comfortable in his social relationships and he became friends with a lot more kids. . . . I see him interacting with his friends in class and I see him talking to his teachers. . . . He just seemed to feel good about himself."

⁵ McClelland, Acock, & Morrison, 2006

⁶ Bergin, Ford, & Hess, 1993

⁷ Hyson, 1985

⁸ Lepper & Gurtner, 1989

⁹ Liu, 1996

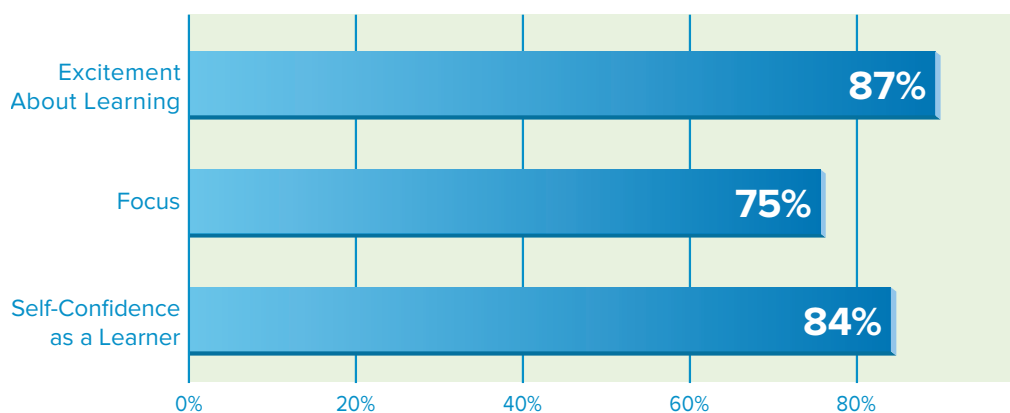
Beliefs about self-efficacy have long been established as strongly connected to motivation and student achievement.¹⁰ Students who believe that they are smart, are skilled, and will achieve success are more likely to master academic concepts and have positive learning outcomes. A review of more than 300 research studies concluded that technology has a positive effect on student attitudes about learning, their self-confidence, and their self-esteem.¹¹

Nicole also reported major gains in Michael's confidence after using ABCmouse.com:

"As he's gone through ABCmouse.com, he's transformed into this outgoing, funny, whirlwind personality. He just loves to talk to people now. He's gone from a shy, reserved kid to who he is and who he will be. He's proud of who he is and what he can accomplish. He's got this incredible self-esteem that you don't often see at his age. He knows that he's smart."

Jennifer and Nicole's experiences with ABCmouse.com echo the results of a 2014 survey of nearly 5,000 parents with children using ABCmouse.com, sponsored by Age of Learning. The overwhelming majority of parents reported that ABCmouse.com had a meaningful positive impact on their children's approaches to learning, in addition to helping them learn language, literacy, and math skills and concepts.

Parents Report ABCmouse.com Strengthens Engagement and Self-Confidence



Percent of parents in 2014 survey who reported high or medium impact of ABCmouse.com vs. low or no impact (n=4966).

Michael and Alex were at different stages of development when they began using ABCmouse.com. Michael was trying to catch up to the level of his peers and Alex was on target with his milestones. Their parents had different intentions for the role of ABCmouse.com; yet both families were impressed with the significant academic and non-academic progress they observed in their children. With ABCmouse.com, Alex and Michael strengthened their motivation to learn, became

more engaged with learning, and grew confident as learners. Importantly, the strengths that they built in the virtual world of ABCmouse.com carried over into the classroom. Nicole and Jennifer were thrilled to find that ABCmouse.com contributed to their children's school readiness and achievement in school. Effective digital resources that integrate an academic curriculum with social-emotional and cognitive components can meaningfully improve school readiness and success.

¹⁰ Zimmerman, 2000

¹¹ Sivin-Kachala & Bialo, 2000

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